

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 4, Episode 5, “The Importance of Words”

[A message from a member of the League’s Business Leadership Council]

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[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is The City Speak. I'm your host Luke Fischer. I'm joined this week by Lisa Iverson. She's serving her third term as the mayor of Wyoming. [Podcast theme music fades out] Before serving as mayor, she served as a council member for two years. Lisa's also got a big leadership role in the state: she's the vice-chair for the Minnesota Mayors Association; she's been the past president of the Wyoming Area Business Association where she's still an active member; and she works as a hospice care consultant in her day job. Lisa's a busy person, and I'm grateful that she made some time to be with us.

Lisa Iverson:

Thank you.

Luke Fischer:

So, Lisa, I'm curious, what drew you to the public sector leadership roles that you've had?

Lisa Iverson:

Back in my days before hospice care consultant, other things that I've done ...

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

... I was president of the Wyoming Area Business Association.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Lisa Iverson:

I just kinda saw some changes that I think our businesses needed, and of course anybody who gets into politics think they can do it bigger and better. And so I, I jumped in and first run, was elected to council for four years ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... and during the middle of that, ran for mayor and have been mayor since.

Luke Fischer:

What's been the biggest surprise for you so far as an elected official? What's the biggest difference between that and serving your business community?

Lisa Iverson:

There is a huge difference. I'm just always amazed at ... you're, you're constantly on, as an elected official, if that makes sense.

Luke Fischer:

Hmm. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

You're always being watched by what you say and what you do and, and who you talk to. And it's not just serving businesses anymore, it's actually serving 8,000 people, plus the 200 businesses that are in Wyoming.

Luke Fischer:

I'm curious, as a leader, has there been a time when you've maybe made a mistake, or done something that you wish in hindsight you would've approached a little bit differently?

Lisa Iverson:

I'm gonna have to say I have a little giggle on that, because, oh, yeah, [laughs] there's probably been several times, that I could say that happened. But ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... I'm gonna say probably the biggest thing, I had to apologize, that really changed how I lead the city, was when I was on council — unfortunately I didn't know better. We had a policy from Chief Hoppe, and that would be every year or so, we would buy new police cars.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Lisa Iverson:

But they would be at a 100,000 miles, and then we'd sell them and rotate those cars. Well, me, being usually just a citizen, thinking, "Hey, my car can get 200,000 and 300,000 ...

Luke Fischer:

Okay.

Lisa Iverson:

... miles, why can't a police car get that, right?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

So, I will tell you, I voted no for two years on that, 'cause I didn't know any better, right?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

So, I kinda had this aha moment and said, "Well maybe I should ride with a police officer." Just to kinda get a better understanding of what happens when you're in a police car, right? So, I will tell you, when you're in a squad car, and you're at a stop, and you have to go 90 miles an hour in less than, what, five seconds?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

And you feel how hard that car is, is ran, and you just see that it's on all the time, the car's always running.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

So it really just opened my eyes as to, "Wow, I was wrong during this time," and I had to have that conversation when I became mayor, and I apologized to Chief Hoppe for being kind of such a pain ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... and realized my mistake. And now I use that example for everything else that I do in my leadership and how I make decisions.

Luke Fischer:

So, let's go back to the chief for just a second. How did he take the apology? Was he a willing a recipient? Or was it a, "I told you so mayor."

Lisa Iverson:

[laughs] Well, thank goodness for Chief Hoppe, if anybody knows him well on Twitter ...

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

... he's got quite a good sense of humor. So, he did, he took it really well. And I would say through all of that — you know when people like you they kind of pick on you a lot?

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

And, you know, that's what Chief Hoppe does. And so it was, it was a really good turn in our relationship.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Lisa Iverson:

'Cause I'm sure he probably thought, "Ah, you know here's this council woman just saying no all the time, what does she know?"

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

And then to be able to see the error of my ways, I think he appreciated that. And, and I was able to go out and explain it to our residents as well, right?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

'Cause otherwise I was out there saying, "We don't need you know, to replace our cop cars every year, that's just silly."

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

And so, you learn the value that words matter as well as what you're saying out in that community and, and I had to tell some residents I was wrong. So, very humble.

Luke Fischer:

Wow, I've got to imagine becoming the new mayor, you, you've got big shoes, you've got the gavel when you go into a meeting, sort of setting a different tone with an apology, or with a, "My bad," to start your term probably reset things with staff a little bit along the way.

Lisa Iverson:

Yeah, it, it, really did. I was, again, one of those people that would come to the meetings before I was elected and I would be, you know, "Oh, you can't do this, and you, you can't do that," 'cause as a resident, I don't think you truly understand what our staff goes through ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... and what our employees go through, right?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

It was a reset. And I couldn't do my job now without our core office staff, without our fire department, without our public safety and, and I've done a lot of things that are outside my comfort zone ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... to actually show them how much I appreciate what they do. And when I make a decision, I've stepped into their shoes to really kind of know this is the right decision or the wrong decisions. And making sure that I'm saying in the public what really matters, and how it really works — how government really works.

Luke Fischer:

My assumption is along the way, you've really probably been reassured in your position or what you were thinking, but there have probably been other places where you've maybe changed your perspective a little bit. I'm curious, when it comes to working with the public then, how does that go? Because you ... Is it a, "Hey I went and checked it out myself, and it really is this way, or it really is that hard," or has the public come to expect that you're out and you're getting some experience with people?

Lisa Iverson:

That's a really great question.

Lisa Iverson:

And as you become mayor, you're really seen as that leader. When we're trying to get things done within the city, and we need the residents to really kinda buy into it ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... those words are super important on how they come across, right?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

So, before I'd be like, "We don't need new cop cars, you know, we can get all this mileage," to now, where we need city facilities and we need four new buildings at \$18.5 million.

Luke Fischer:

Wow.

Lisa Iverson:

I'm not going to a resident and saying, "Yeah, you know, it's \$18.5 million for buildings," right?

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

'Cause what are you gonna say, you're gonna say, "Heck no."

Luke Fischer:

Right.

Lisa Iverson:

But if I explain to residents what it is, it's four building and it's because our fire trucks no longer fit and it's because ...

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

It tends to take on a different direction, right? Where people are starting to understand. And so the words I choose are very important to make sure that people understand how it's better for the city or for the resident.

Luke Fischer:

So, Mayor Lisa, I'm curious, resiliency right now is something that we're talking a lot about and sometimes it's a buzz word. But I'm curious, what keeps you going? You've got a lot of energy, you've got a lot on your plate, your city's moving quickly, what keeps you going? What keeps you motivated?

Lisa Iverson:

This sounds pretty canned but it's true ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Lisa Iverson:

... for people who know me. I wanna make sure the world is a better place when I leave. And, being in hospice, for my day job, life is short, right? Life is short.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Iverson:

And whatever I can do — I have three more years in my term — that I can help and influence the most amount of people, and whether that's in my city capacity, whether it's in the Minnesota Mayor's Association and working with 854 mayors, with, you know, stuff that's going on at the state, right, legislatively. Or, it can even be with the county. So it's just kinda looking at the betterment of Minnesota as a whole. All it takes is one person who will ... who says, "Thank you," it might be once in every five months or something. You know, that's what drives me, is knowing that when I'm gone, that Veteran's Memorial that I worked [inaudible] on is gonna be the first thing you look at when you come in our city, right?

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Lisa Iverson:

And hopefully, my great grandkids are gonna know that their great grandma had something to do with that and it made Wyoming better. And that's all I've ever wanted is to make the city of Wyoming and the residents love their city that much more, like I do.

Luke Fischer:

Well, Mayor Lisa, thank you so much for sharing some time with us today, but thank you more importantly for your service to the city of Wyoming, and to the Mayor's Association, and to other leaders across the state. Your contributions certainly are noticed, and they're important, and you've had a big impact already.

Lisa Iverson:

Thank you so much.

Luke Fischer:

All right listeners, I hope you enjoyed our conversation with Lisa Iverson, the mayor of Wyoming today. Reflecting on our conversation, there are a couple of things that I would take away. The first is that there's a certain vulnerability necessary to apologize. Maybe you didn't have the right perspective on something, but doing it can really help bring people along, and invite people in, and maybe even wanna follow you. One of the other things I'm taking away from our conversation with Mayor Lisa is that words are important and how you act matters. The staff, and the public, are all cuing on you when you have a city leadership role. And it's important to that into perspective with everything you do.

Luke Fischer:

[Podcast theme music begins] That's it for our show. Thanks to our guest Lisa Iverson, and to all of you out there listening and doing the hard rewarding work that cities do. You can find us in all of the places where podcasts are found, and you can rate and review us there, too. We'd love to hear from you, so please send us your comments and suggestions to podcast@lmc.org. Thanks so much for tuning in, and be well.
[Podcast theme music ends]